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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000780

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA

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TAGS: PREL PGOV PTER PINR ASEC UNSC EAIR SA IR LE

SUBJECT: LEBANON: MARCH 14 SELECTS FOUAD SINIORA AS PRIME MINISTER

REF: A. BEIRUT 770

¶B. BEIRUT 766

¶C. BEIRUT 747

¶D. BEIRUT 733

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Shortly before March 14 announced on May 27 that Fouad Siniora was its candidate for prime minister, Druze leader Walid Jumblatt shared ongoing deliberations affecting majority leader Saad Hariri's decision whether to take the job himself. On cabinet formation, Jumblatt argued that March 14 should retain the Ministries of Finance and Justice.

Although unaware of who Sleiman's choices would be for top army positions, he argued strongly against nominating the current head of military intelligence as the Commander-in-Chief. Jumblatt viewed Hizballah SYG Hassan Nasrallah's May 26 speech as a rejoinder to President Sleiman's "strong" acceptance speech, and warned of growing Hizballah influence in Beirut. Hizballah and other opposition members probably will not endorse Siniora as prime minister, leaving consensus President Sleiman to start of his term without a consensus prime minister. End summary.

SAAD SHOULD NOT BE
PRIME MINISTER

¶2. (C) CDA Sison, accompanied by Pol/Econ Chief, met with Druze leader Walid Jumblatt at his residence in Clemenceau on May 27, shortly before Jumblatt attended an unexpectedly short March 14 meeting that resulted in the nomination of Fouad Siniora as Prime Minister in the next cabinet, ending speculation that majority leader Saad Hariri intended to keep the job for himself. (Jumblatt phoned the Charge less than an hour after the meeting to relay the news, some two hours before the decision was announced publicly.) Jumblatt told the Charge that he had advised Saad "gently" not to be prime minister, but did not know whether he would heed his advice, especially since others were pushing him to take the job.

¶3. (C) Saad reportedly had pleaded for Jumblatt's support, warning that without help in countering (current Minister of Transportation and Tripoli bloc MP) Mohamad Safadi's influence, he would have to take the job himself. (Comment: Safadi, a member of March 14, has waned from the coalition in

the past, most notably last fall, when he supported the opposition's assertion that a two-thirds parliamentary quorum was necessary to elect a president. He had said he would support Saad's candidacy for prime minister, but would oppose Siniora. End comment.)

¶ 14. (C) According to Jumblatt, President Sleiman had sent Saad several messages expressing his support, while Iranian journalists had told Druze MP Wael Abu Four that Iran would "help" Lebanon if Saad were chosen, but not if Siniora became prime minister. Druze Minister of Information Ghazi Aridi, on the other hand, reportedly told Saad that Saudi King Abdullah had sent Saad a message that he should not take the position. Ultimately, Jumblatt predicted, the decision will depend on Saad's "inner court." "Saad is a friend," he said; "if he wants to be in the prime minister club, that is his decision. If I were Saad, I wouldn't, but it is tempting."

¶ 15. (C) The Charge noted that the most important objective was to lay the political groundwork to win the 2009 parliamentary elections. Jumblatt agreed, saying March 14 needed to consolidate its position, and Saad in particular needed to work on his own Future movement and the Sunnis, especially in the north, where Future MP Samir Jisr was no match for the likes of Sunni heavyweights Mohamad Safadi and Najib Mikati. "Saad doesn't like strong, independent personalities," Jumblatt commented, adding that Independent Tripoli MP Mosbah Ahdab was good.

¶ 16. (C) Jumblatt also agreed that the new government would have to make tough economic choices, leaving Saad as the fall

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guy if he were the prime minister. Where is the famous \$1 billion Saudi Central Bank deposit? he asked rhetorically. Saad had asked the Saudis for \$400 million to purchase land to prevent Hizballah from buying up the country, but the Saudis would never give him this much, Jumblatt said. Saad should pony up the money himself, he suggested, instead of wasting it on Sunni "security forces" and Solidere shares. (Comment: Solidere share prices increased 15 percent, the maximum allowed, several days in a row in the wake of the recent violence, which some attribute to a strong dose of Hariri funds rather than a reflection of actual market reactions, Ref C. End comment.)

FORMING THE NEXT GOVERNMENT

¶ 17. (C) On cabinet formation, Jumblatt foresaw a big dispute between Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement and March 14 Christians. If independent MP Michel Murr became Minister of the Interior, this would resolve the issue, he said. For Minister of Foreign Affairs, Jumblatt caustically predicted "this brilliant guy" Salloukh (the current, albeit resigned, Foreign Minister). At a minimum, March 14 should retain the Ministries of Defense and Justice for itself, he stated firmly. For the Minister of Energy, who would face a \$1 billion deficit, Jumblatt said, "Let them (the opposition) have it."

¶ 18. (C) Jumblatt had no information on who would be tapped as Sleiman's chief advisor, saying only he would like to know who had written Sleiman's speech. Noting that LAF G-2 (military intelligence) Director Georges Khoury would be dining at his home the following evening, Jumblatt warned that it would be bad if Khoury became the next LAF Commander, given his close connection with Hizballah military intelligence chief Wafiq Safa. He also warned against General Boulos Matar, a former Aounist and current Commander south of the Litani river, claiming that after Aoun's ousting as President in 1989 Matar had been sent to Damascus for training.

HIZBALLAH'S ANTICS

¶9. (C) Raising his eyes in mock, Jumblatt said Hizballah SYG Hassan Nasrallah had "again!" delivered a "victory speech" during his May 26 Liberation Day delivery (Ref A). He opined that the speech was an answer to President Sleiman's "strong" acceptance speech (Ref B), which had not pleased Hizballah. Jumblatt again expressed concerns that Saad was being misled by Hizballah, citing pictures of him embracing Hizballah MP Mohamad Raad in Doha and adding in typical blunt Jumblatt fashion, "I don't like it." (Note: Jumblatt himself has been accused of cozying up to the Iranians at the May 25 Biel dinner, an accusation he denies, Ref B).

¶10. (C) Commenting on clashes reported earlier in the evening between Druze and Hizballah in the mixed Sunni/Shia/Druze Aramoun area of Beirut (south of Beirut International Airport), he said the dispute began between a Druze family and a Shia cleric living in the same building. The Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) had intervened, and one LAF soldier was killed by a Druze, who was subsequently arrested. Jumblatt scoffed at reports the government was banning motorcycles and inflammatory slogans. He predicted demographic changes in Beirut as residents, especially Sunnis, fled the city because they no longer feel secure there.

COMMENT

¶11. (C) In choosing Siniora, March 14 has opted for continuity. President Sleiman begins consultations the morning of May 28 with parliamentary blocs from both the majority and opposition to make a formal decision on whether Siniora will indeed head the next government. While the opposition, which viewed the current Siniora government as illegitimate following the November 2006 resignation of six opposition ministers (including all five Shia ministers), is not expected to endorse March 14's choice, opposition contacts have told us that ultimately the decision rests with

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the majority. However, by appointing a prime minister who does not enjoy a broad endorsement in parliament, President Sleiman will be starting his six-year term without the consensus that many Lebanese view as necessary to promote reconciliation between Lebanon's deeply divided factions.

¶12. (C) On the other hand, the announcement that March 14 had selected Siniora was greeted with unanimous support by the 100 and some guests at a May 27 dinner in honor of the Charge representing the creme de la creme of Lebanese business society. End comment.

SISON